# CITY CULTURE: DIVERSE CHARMS

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***O**bserving Jakarta city by walking through the neighbourhoods and networks of drains, you will quickly come to a clear and simple conclusion. Jakarta is a big city, and big cities are complicated, difficult and hard to breathe in.*

**1**

And whenever people fly over the main city, with its population of 9 million people, the main impression is that there is a sprawl of residences, road networks, and a sense of poverty spreading out to every corner of the city.

The complication is real, something which immediately impresses on our senses and sensations, while the poverty of the city is something that is indistinct, far away, not immediately tangible.

People who can differentiate these two issues, the complication of the city and the poverty of the city, are all people who stand at a distance from real life. And because of the distance that separates reality from the observer, a critical gaze emerges towards these very real issues.

And if a person observes the city further, then the edges of that far away blur might be imagined to be what is called city culture. This culture is a way of life, and this way of life is an effort to keep breathing in the midst of the complication and poverty that uniquely signifies this way of living together. City culture is, in other words, a poor and complicated culture.

**City culture, in other words, is a culture that is poor and complicated.**

**2**

Then, in the midst of this situation, how can we position the roaring and rumbling of a few youngsters who are reaching for their dreams of beauty, who have grouped together as the "New Fine Art Movement"? Art that isn't elitist, but also isn't "pop"? New art, that rejects the old principles?

The problem will revolve around the departure point they take. Or people will locate the issue of city culture, in the sense that it has been implied, from the material and ingredients supplied by the movement. Or using a different method, people will place the movement inside the whole city dynamic, which is none other than the poor and complicated city.

Choosing the first option will mean that the movement is sufficiently rich and various in the sense of movement; whilst choosing the second option will mean seeing the activity of these young people within the frame of city life, locating them as one of its gauges.

Consequently, what will emerges from the second option is a map of the city, whilst in the first a face of the city will be created from the reference material of a movement.

With the full consciousness that by choosing the second the aesthetic elements will be pushed backwards and societal aspects will emerge towards the front, this is the option they have chosen. The Movement is a gauge of Jakarta city.

So, if Jakarta city does indeed have a dynamic, a concrete existence and culture, then where will the movement be understood?

The movement is not a centre, but rather it is placed in a joint action along with Jakarta society, where we can find diverse communities, value choices and convictions.

When the city's society is seen as continuously mobile, alongside this a pace of movement emerges that is not the same in all layers of citizenry. There are some in the fast lane, even in a special lane that is obstacle free, and there are also citizens who don't want to go there, and keep heading into the slow lane.

Jakarta is all of these diverse speeds. So which lane is the New Fine Art Movement in?

It is very difficult to find a generally accurate picture of what comprises Jakarta city. However, it would make sense to say that the majority of the citizens haven't experienced meaningful fluctuations in recent times. Jakarta is not a city that is in revolution, but rather it changes like other cities do. It is a city that continues to grow, fast or slow.

As far as its citizens understand, the most tangible change is the change in economic levels. And in that language, the economic levels known as the lower strata, the middle strata and the upper strata. In regards to this, the table below will give a brief picture. This shows where citizens place themselves in these classes.

Table I:

In the last two or three years, which class did you move into

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| a-b | 129 | 1.49 |
| a-c | 2 | 0.14 |
| b-a | 144 | 10.24 |
| b-c | 27 | 1.92 |
| c-b | 24 | 1.71 |
| c-a | 2 | 0.14 |
| No change | 1057 | 75.18 |
| No answer | 21 | 1.49 |
| | 1385 | 100 |

Note: a = lower class, b = middle class
c = upper class

Source: Research results at Hutan Kayu, 1987

So, around three quarters of those who were approached said that their lives had not changed much. And only a quarter had moved strata in the last two or three years. Within the group that had changed, what stands out is that 10.24% have fallen from the middle strata to the lower strata, whilst those who rose from the lower strata to the middle strata made up around 9.17%.

One thing that can be drawn from these figures is that from the quarter of citizens who had shifted, the centre of traffic was in the middle strata of the city. Or in other words, the most obvious dynamic can be observed in the middle strata of city society.

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These are not unusual occurrences. Things like this are general tendencies that can occur in city societies. The dynamics will be found in those who have fallen from the middle strata and those who rose up the ladder of the middle strata.

But, in regards to these strata, how can they be understood in real terms?
To give a real picture, a measure of opinions expressed by citizens as to what is sufficient for their families is sought.

Table II:

How much do you consider to be sufficient income, for how many people?

| | | (per month) |
|---|---|---|
| Under Rp 27,000 | 40 | 02.84 |
| 27,000 – Rp.67,000 | 209 | 14.83 |
| 67,000 – Rp. 184,000 | 297 | 21.12 |
| Over Rp. 184,000 | 221 | 15.72 |
| No answer | 639 | 45,45 |
| | 1386 | 100 |

Source: Research results at Hutan Kayu, 1987

If these two tables are read together, with the notation that 25% of respondents have stated that they have experienced change in their economic class, and after this we pay attention to their opinions regarding how much is sufficient income, then we will find those that entered the "middle" strata (those with income between Rp. 67,000 and Rp. 184,000) make up 21.12%. Hence we can say, with great caution, that perhaps whether that group is the centre of the city's dynamic could be investigated.

So, where are the New Fine Art Movements investigations located? The answer is, they are the children of the city's middle class, ecause that layer is perhaps where the centre of social and economic movement can be found. So perhaps action, disappointment, protest and impingement can be investigated through culture.

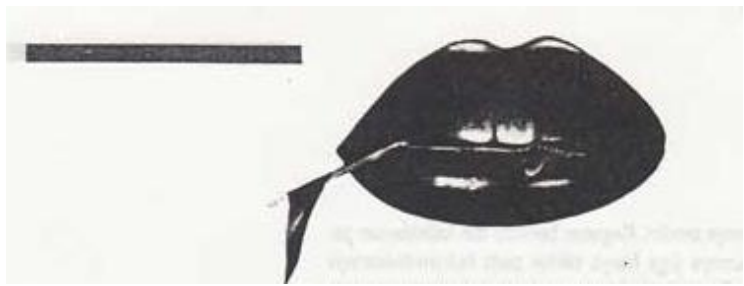
But anxiety in the city is not so easy to localise. Because if we look at the distance between actual income and what people really desire, that is where we find a not insignificant level of dissatisfaction.

If table II is read alongside table III, then the centre of anxiety is not to be found in the "middle" strata, but rather in the lower strata. From their statements, those that have very low incomes make up 39.69%, but among those there are only 2.84% that are happy to stay at that level. Or to put it another way, the majority of city residents are in the lower class, and there are very few city folk who accept their situation. The strongest majority is those who are prepared to move upwards the social ladder.

Table III:

Household income per capita

| | | (per month) |
|---|---|---|
| Under Rp 27,000 | 558 | 39.69 |
| 27,000 – Rp.67,000 | 492 | 34.99 |
| 67,000 – Rp. 184,000 | 251 | 17.85 |
| Over Rp. 184,000 | 86 | 6.12 |
| No answer | 19 | 1.35 |
| | 1387 | 100 |

Source: Research results at Hutan Kayu, 1987

Generally we can say that the groups of society who actually experience change, whether up or down, include around a quarter of citizens, but those with the potential for change are a far greater percentage.

In fact it is not so easy to find where the centre of city like Jakarta's dynamic is. Because the most that can be said is that both the lower levels and the middle levels (perhaps because they are the largest proportion) is where concrete or potential movement can be found.

But it is not possible to determine anything further, and even within that interpretation the New Fine Art Movement is not so easily found in a position from which they will clearly be able to "enter," nor which road it will be.

This is because, if the materials presented are economically able to provide an indicator of where these societal movements occur, culturally this tells us nothing at all. It is impossible to say that those who are economically dynamic (or disappointed) can be described culturally as filled with passion and prepared to accommodate the most erratic directions. So although sharp economical and social observations utilising the tools provided by social sciences can certainly add to basic information about the structure of society, the problems of values, direction and cultural desire are still too distant to be easily connected, whether that is by invoking its structure or its context, or something similar.

If the figures and orientations of New Fine Art are not art produced by the lower end of society, and then if people want to say that the fine art products they have created are laden with the background of the middle or elite classes, really these two things are meaningless. To say that these are movements emerging from a particular place, or a particular context, or a particular structure, is no more than a guess or a suspicion. This is because an economic or social structure cannot so simply explain the cultural tendencies that occur in that same society.

There are many other things that still need to be done to be able to say that this or that art product is the rooted in this or that strata or class of society.

The explanation above is very simple, and one does not need to look far to find it. So what I want to say is that the effort to locate a movement within a completely comprehensive expanse of societal actions is not an easy thing to do, nor something that will give a concrete, clear picture.

Movements like this that occur in fine art will not be "completed" by explanations that refer to particular social structures. In the same way social structures will also be untouched, if they are to be explained through the values and spirit for life within this new fine art group.

If we return to the first statement, that city culture is a culture that is complicated and poor, then this too cannot really offer any understanding of the particular artistic tendencies that are revealed by the sensitivity of new fine arts.

The problem lies in the in reality that all of our activity as individuals, or as collectives – seems not to occur through a mechanical, mutual connection. Everything is interconnected, but alongside this, all of these different kinds of activities have their own independence field.

The most systematic kind of knowledge-based activity, that being science, has its own autonomy and independence. Science and culture do not

generally only submit to their own laws. It's the same with all other kinds of human activity, let alone within the different kinds of activity that occur in different levels of society. Thus it is the intersecting and criss-crossing that is most evident, not one particular pattern of uniform activity.

If there is one thing that should be noted from new fine art it is their recognition of and aspiration to accept all of this intersecting and criss-crossing, and that they themselves do not impose a kind of hierarchical framework over the cultural or artistic order.

So if in the artistic practice they accept offerings of expertise from the social sciences, for example, then that is completely understandable in the sense that the kinds of languages, tastes and thinking in the artistic field are not easily reconciled to the fields of language, taste and disciplinary concepts of the social sciences. Art and science are two disciplines that can live together, and the New Fine Art Movement is genuinely involved in that. Taste in art prefers to root itself in study and observation that is not only inspirational, but also seeks to be based on organised observations of society, like those prevalent in scientific fields.

This movement is interesting precisely because of this understanding of its aspirations. Consequently in this field, what should be noted is not merely the context or structure that they are moving in, but neither just the taste or aesthetic understandings that they feel.

More importantly, and perhaps this indicates a real necessity, is the issue that could be defined as "what kind of artistic sensitivity and aspiration is being presented by this movement?"

Mutual influence between both art and science might well be two things strange to describe. But if the artistic presentations like those of this group are studied more closely, it is the art-related problems that need to bee seen through this framework.

Perhaps the New Fine Art Movement can be best understood from the group's rejection of art that is "technical" and elitist, and their other tendency to place art on the spectrum of the whole of society's tendencies; and now that it is put down on paper, even better. If placed on a cultural map of Jakarta, or even a map of fine art in Indonesia, this fine art group will be able to offer an exit point for a number of modern-day artistic and cultural problems.

At least in the sense that they have been able to group together a number of problems as "irrelevant", their efforts are already noteworthy.

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And what is it that is no longer relevant to the life of art? Firstly, there is the evaluation of, and taste in art that has been outlined by the long history of European civilisation, particularly in the field of fine art. And secondly, there is that if art is empirical, then it must also be "aligned", or at least as far as giving voice to the cries of the broader audience below.

It seems these are two issues that stand at cultural poles that can clearly be put in the field of irrelevant problems. In relation to this, efforts in the field of art can attain characteristics and rhythms that are no different from other sectors of society.

Turning fine art into an everyday activity could also perhaps be seen as a characteristic that signifies the movement. Art becomes an empirical activity; perhaps another language for the kind of activity that is intended.

However, the most interesting paradox to emerge from the aspiration for a more simplified art is the reality that our "earth" is now far more complicated and developed than can be reflected by dewdrops resting on the end of a green leaf.

So in this sense, making art through new actions is in turn a claim to step in time with contemporary culture. There are many other "technical" elements that must be processed, added and unified. It is in this sense that the art that is most every-day has developed as the possession of a particular group, a group that is capable, and makes art.

All of the afore-mentioned problems can also be expressed in different ways. That is, if people experience significant difficulty when locating artistic process in the way new fine art does, well, on the other sideof the fence the goal that the group self-determined has set is neither easy nor clearly in their hands.

Within those art products that reach our senses, it is not too difficult to recognise the objects on offer. This means that the object that is taken up and processed can itself already signify a move towards this kind of art. The objects that are taken up, processed and presented in their "natural" forms, or "artistic" forms are everyday things, using whatever means the many use to express themselves, their needs and their aspirations. Objects laden with this "form" are taken up and presented in their joint artistic processes, which are understood as new fine art.

But in connection with this clear, simple and lively action and cooperation, even the very first person will in fact grasp that these are diverse and complicated problems, both for the instigators

themselves and for the art audience in general. So, before this level of debate can be attained in matters that are absolutely primary in the expressions of this new art, then problems must be foregrounded.

This series of problems revolves around the program that has been announced, which intends to turn the processes and products of fine art into the every-day.

In a local sense, these problems could be questions of whether the way to invigorate fine art in big cities like Jakarta differs from artistic activity that occurs amongst the Balinese. Whilst in its broadest sense, the problem is how to invigorate the rhythm and taste in fine art in ways similar to that which can be clearly seen these days in several continental European states, especially France. Here cultural concepts that are close to the people live alongside towering art works, all located in a welfare state that functions normally. Jakarta will always produce a complicated culture

Firstly, we must bear in mind the absence of a strong macro framework for the continuation of art like that of New Fine Art in Jakarta. Agrarian societiess in the homogenous Hindu tradition that existed for centuries are far removed cities born out of the colonial ambitions of Dutch traders, like Batavia. The framework for a welfare state that protects art in France is also hard to grasp when in reality we have to look at the state framework in which Jakarta is included, or is the primary section of.

So the macro framework does not exist in Jakarta. Meanwhile on the other hand, in what form could we find the kind of cultural uniformity that is dominant in Bali or in Paris? People can find a chaos of stickers, advertisements, slogans or posters; but almost all of these could be said to be commercial products that feel far removed from the long rhythms of the long existence of Hindu temples and rituals, and also with the normative structures of a capitalist society that can accommodate, give birth to and preserve fine art figures like Picasso, Renoir or Cezanne from recent times, or classical figures like Delacroix or Corbet.

So both the framework and the contents of the New Fine Art, who are active in a national capital that is entering its post-colonial phase, are empty. In comparison to other forms of fine art that are immersed in the everyday – whether in the agrarian hamlets of Bali or in the world's capital of fine art, Paris – there is nothing. New Fine Art was born together with the clattering hailstorm of commercial goods and equipment, which was itself already giving birth to or signposting a self-referential social order.

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This problem won't stop there. Because as a product or a part of a society that is drowning in commercial law, fine art that aims to be everyday must in its turn face particular laws. This kind of art cannot possibly continue to live if it must base itself on prevailing commercial regulations. This is because art products are completely unable to become the kind of retail product that can be turned into money. When making art, people deliberately withdraw themselves from commercial activity; in doing so it then becomes impossible for art-making to be part of everyday activity in a professional sense, as is revealed by Balinese artists or fine art workers in Western Europe.

Thus, everyday fine art is not the whole of the process, but more of a dream and an aspiration. And whenever dreams and aspirations are exploited cooperatively with technical observation of the kind only achievable with normative research procedures, then all of this – once again – signifies our earlier statement. Art products from a city like Jakarta will always be rhe products of a complicated culture.

To give a picture of the origins of the kind of art movement that is manifested in the New Fine Art Movement, there are now two things that can be clearly stated. **Firstly,** the structural roots of the movement are not easy to trace, and there is no clear definition either from the anxious lower strata, or from the dynamic middle strata. **Secondly,** if the structural framework or the origins are not used and people look more to the tendencies described in the typology of the relevant city society (a post-colonial society, in comparison to agrarian areas in Bali and welfare states in Europe) then the movement towards everyday art will be seen as out of step with the general line of thought from its own commercial community. Artistic practice is the processing of dreams or aspirations that might have particular sensitivity towards these tendencies.

The map of culture in which the New Fine Art Movement locates itself is already complicated and indistinct in its division of areas (in the past people distinguished between commercial and fine arts, in the same way that the disciplines distinguish between the pure sciences and applied sciences).
Because of this the value of this kind of work is no different and none other than the value and acknowledgement that is given to dreams and passions that free themselves from the crush of constraining city life. And in Jakarta, once more, it is

far removed from the chains of Balinese villages or the rows of fine art museums in world metropolises like Paris. Jakarta city is a former colonial city, and the traditions of colonial history itself cultural are not insignificant in terms of its complexity.

As a final note, wherever a person can successfully take up the complexity of life into a line of thinking or expression – and that process is appropriately described as a creative process – then the final result will no longer return to its originary complexity, but rather create an action that moves forward and tries to explain that complexity in another way.
Or, if a person comes into the exhibition space, and they can feel, see and evaluate the complexity of life in a city of the world called Jakarta, through the collaborative works of this New Fine Art group, then cultural life itself is actually taking place. The New Fine Art Movement cannot promise anything in that process apart from the emphasis that dreams are necessary. Their sensitivity to the reality that surrounds them must be maintained. There is nothing more than this simple thing. The absence of the two structural requisites for the existence of a “movement” will always force New Fine Art to achieve no more than a ripple and a splash. If a group of young people initiate an art exhibition with the dream of a clean flowing process with clear and simple boundaries, I feel their dreams would be far from reality. The dreams of New Fine Art are dreams of sensitivity, in no way are they dreams of a movement.

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